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ABSTRACT

In poetry, the only escape from meter is mastery. An understanding of the physical basis of poetry contributes not only to the literary appreciation and analysis of poetry but also to effective communication and language usage in daily life. The ideal time to begin teaching meter is in early childhood, but many older students need to be reacquainted with the fact that all poetry has to have structure, even free verse, concrete poetry, and the lyrics of popular music. English has become a remarkably rich language that, through historical accidents and its inherent potential, offers poets such metrical curiosities as sprung or dipodic rhythm, which combines different stresses to produce a lilt or swing in the reading of a poetic line. Meter can contribute to poetic "meaning" in a number of ways: it appeals to the human love for form: metrical substitutions can emphasize important passages: and poems can be linked by metrical associations or conventions. Most of all, writing poetry within a prescribed or preselected form allows the author to proceed with a needed distance, objectivity, or detachment that lifts the work out of the depths of sentimentality or emotionalism. (Examples of poetic rhythms and their effects are included.) (RL)

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TEACHING METER: WHY AND HOW

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TEACHING METER: WHY AND HOW

by

John J. Roberts

After a dozen years of dance classes, my wife knows all about the five basic positions of classical ballet, and she knows the riff, hop, jump, slap, shuffle, pull-back, and all that other stuff in tap. Me, all I know is that you aren't supposed to hear a ballerina's slippers and you are supposed to hear a tap dancer's feet. What does all this mean? Well, it means that my wife gets infinitely more than I do out of an evening at the ballet or an old Donald O'Connor movie.

And that point applies to any human activity. Life is a lot more interesting if you understand the technical side of sauces, or car engines, or football, or dress-making, or plumbing, than if you don't.

The same goes for poetry. If theme were all that poets cared about, then they could send telegrams and save all their labor. No, it is technique that makes the difference. Robert Frost was once asked by an incredulous interviewer if he could actually like investing time in all those minor formal problems, and Frost replied, "Like 'em? I revel in 'em!" W. H. Auden has assured us, "Every poet has his dream reader: mine keeps a look out for curious prosodic

fauna like bacchics and choriambs."[1] Auden also testified, "All my life, I have been more interested in poetic technique than anything else." Of course, a poet must have something important to say, not just technical virtuosity. Robert Bridges is a sobering reminder of that simple principle, I'm afraid. The proper balance is struck in Emerson's observation, "It is not meters, but a meter-making argument that makes a poem."

The knowledgeable reader of poetry, then, understands the joys of technical things--like rhyme. So does every child, which is why kids take such delight in thumping sound repetitions like "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers." But what Alexander Pope does in his Dunciad is more sophisticated, when he has the goddess of dullness declaim,

> "Silence, ye wolves! while Ralph to Cynthia howls,
> And makes night hideous--answer him, ye owls!"

James Ralph was a minor poet who had praised a certain Cynthia, but Pope makes "ye owls" slide into "yowls," turning poor Ralph's serenade into the midnight outcry of a cat in heat. It's cruel enough to have the owls answer him with hoots, but that "yowls" is the technical fillip.

For another example of the important role rhyme can play, there is this couplet from Herrick:

> Then while time serves, and we are but decaying,
> Come, my Corinna, come, let's go a-Maying.

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[1] ∪−− and −∪∪−.

Herrick captures in those two words, reinforced by rhyme, the contrast that gives the carpe diem theme its poignancy and urgency.

Anne Sexton is not usually thought of as a poet who prefers rhyming, but here is a brilliant instance from her poem, "Eighteen Days Without You":

> and of course we're not married, we are a pair of scissors
> who come together to cut, without towels saying His. Hers.

It's not just the original rhyme, but the scissors imagery and the stress pattern too, that elicits our sympathy for the woman speaking.

For the knowledgeable reader of poetry, stanza form can also reinforce understanding and enjoyment. This is the age of the ERA, so I am reminded of that delightful two-stanza piece of misogyny by A. E. Housman, in which the first quatrain celebrates Adam and Paradise, while the second quatrain turns to Eve and the loss of Eden:

> When Adam day by day
> Woke up in Paradise,
> He always used to say
> "Oh, this is very nice."
>
> But Eve from scenes of bliss
> Transported him for life.
> The more I think of this
> The more I beat my wife.

In a similar light mood, the narrator of Arthur Guiterman's "On the Vanity of Earthly Greatness" organizes his musings into rhymed couplets

that neatly accommodate themselves to four thought-units, four stanzas:

The tusks that clashed in mighty brawls
Of mastodons, are billiard balls.

The sword of Charlemagne that Just
Is ferric oxide, known as rust.

The grizzly bear whose potent hug
Was feared by all, is now a rug.

Great Caesar's bust is on the shelf,
And I don't feel so well myself.

Greater poets have tackled that same ubi sunt theme, but it's hard to improve on Guiterman's iambic tetrameters for clarity and simplicity.

In his recent book on Ezra Pound, Donald Davie complains that "the entire science of traditional prosody has been willfully thrown away. . . ." It is true that many of us have been misled by that unfortunate misnomer "free verse" into thinking we need no longer concern ourselves with traditional rhythms. Back in 1917, T. S. Eliot warned that "the ghost of some simple metre should lurk behind the arras in even the 'freest' verse; to advance menacingly as we doze, and withdraw as we rouse." More to the point, Eliot declared: "There is no escape from metre; there is only mastery."

And so on the one hand we have radicals like William Carlos Williams, grumbling about the tyranny of the iambic foot; on the other hand, we have conservatives like Robert Frost, arguing that the natural rhythm of English speech is iambic pentameter. It is surely

significant that about three-fourths of all the lines in our poetry do fall into iambic pentameter. Only the attentive reader of poetry appreciates the tremendous variety this line permits. I commend to your study a little-known poem by Allen Tate called "The Mediterranean," because Tate has written: "The poem is obviously in iambic pentameter, but I made a point of not writing any two lines in the same rhythm."[2] This poem has thirty-six lines!

A good iambic-pentameter craftsman can have plenty of fun--and so can his reader. Here is Pope again, illustrating what was wrong with much of Augustan verse:

And ten low words oft creep in one dull line.

That is the brilliant sort of creeping, dull iambic pentameter you don't want to write too often! Again, illustrating his point, Pope stretched the iambic pentameter base to cite bad poems in which

A needless Alexandrine ends the song,

That like a wounded snake, drags its slow length along.

Prosodists often differentiate between meter and rhythm, or between "rhetorical pattern" and "metrical pattern." Two iambic pentameters from Paradise Lost dramatically illustrate the distinction:

Immutable, immortal, infinite

. . .

Rocks, caves, lakes, fens, bogs, dens, and shades of death.

The first line, read as if it were prose in isolation, can take as few

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[2]See appendix A.

as three rhetorical stresses; the second line can take as many as eight rhetorical stresses; but both lines, in poetic context, perfectly fit the iambic pentameter model.

That is impressive, but I hope I won't offend any lovers of Milton when I suggest that the real fireworks are in Shakespeare's iambic pentameters. In Lear's lines on his dead fool, the old man's grief is brilliantly clear when his rising iambs give way to falling trochees:

> And my poor fool is hang'd! No, no, no life!
> Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,
> And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more,
> Never, never, never, never, never!

And we have to think in terms of musical rests or "headless iambs" to scan Lear's wild, gasping explosion,

> And when I have stol'n upon these sons-in-law,
> Then, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill![3]

Even regular iambic pentameter lines can give quite different effects because of context. In Wordsworth's Michael, the despairing monotony of the old man's final years is shown when he went daily to the unbuilt sheepfold that should have been his son's

> And never lifted up a single stone.

On the other hand, there is the quietly optimistic ending of Milton's

---

3 Then, kill, | kill, kill, | (ω) kill, | (ω) kill, | (ω) kill!

See King Lear, V, iii, 305-308, and IV, vi, 190-191.

epic, as we focus on Adam and Eve:

> The World was all before them, where to choose
> Thir place of rest, and Providence thir guide:
> They hand in hand, with wand'ring steps and slow
> Through Eden took thir solitary way.

If an understanding of poetic rhythms and meters is important, then, how do we go about instructing our students? In one sense, we are already too late. Northrop Frye has noted that our literary education should begin

> with such things as "this little pig went to market"
> --with verse rhythm reinforced by physical assault.
> The infant who gets bounced on somebody's knee to
> the rhythm of "Ride a cock horse" does not need a
> footnote telling him Banbury Cross is twenty miles
> northeast of Oxford. . . . All he needs is to get
> bounced. If he is, he is beginning to develop a
> response to poetry in the place it ought to start.

I suppose we can't very well bounce our teenaged students on our knees--but we <u>can</u> assure them there is nothing so terribly wrong with belting out the beats in

> O yóung Lochinvár is come óut of the wést
> Through áll the wide bórder his stéed was the bést!

Children leaping along the sidewalk bellowing, "Step on a crack, Break your mother's back, Step on a line, Bust your father's spine" may not be cultivating the proper filial respect, but they <u>are</u> learning the physical basis of poetry.

We might start with our older students by explaining that all poetry has to have structure; otherwise, it is mere chaos. A primal scream may be good self-therapy, I suppose, but it doesn't communicate very well.

So, then: poetry is either metered or unmetered. "Meter" comes from the Greek metron, and what we measure in poetry is the line. When we say a poem is in iambic pentameter, we don't mean the poem is iambic pentameter; we mean that the typical line is. In other words, poetry is structured either by the line, or by something else. Unmetered poetry includes such things as free verse, concrete poetry, carmen figuratum, naked poetry, the "variable foot" of William Carlos Williams, or the "open field" of Charles Olson's Projective Verse. Such poetry follows diverse structural principles, from cadence to visual impact, but it is not organized according to patterns that recur from one line to another.

Mankind has invented only a few ways of measuring lines of poetry. No matter how many different languages men have come up with, after all, the human speaking apparatus and the breath unit are not all that varied. The basic metrical systems are just three: accentual, syllabic, quantitative. Accentual prosody, as in the old Germanic tongues, has a recurring number of stresses per line; syllabic prosody, as in French and other Romance tongues, has a recurring number of syllables per line; quantitative prosody, as in Greek or Latin, measures vowels per line according to a recurring pattern of weight or duration. Some modifications are possible, as when Japanese counts different pitch levels as well as syllables, but such variety

as there is in the world's poetry largely comes from combining these options. Thus, for example, most poetry in English is accentual-syllabic--the meter counts both stresses and syllables in each line.

It was not always so. English poetry didn't start out English at all. Our early epic, the Beowulf, doesn't even mention England, since the original tales predated the arrival of Anglo and Saxon tribes from the continent after the Roman legions withdrew in the early fifth century. Old English meter, with its accentual lines using alliteration and medial caesuras, is illustrated by the beginning of Beowulf:

Hwæt! we Gárdena || in zeárdágum,
þeódcyníngа, || þrym zefrúnon,
hu ðа æþelíngas || éllen fréмedon.
Oft Scýld Scéfing || sceáþena þréatum,
mónegum mæzþum, || meodosetla ofteah,
egsode eórlas.[4]

This ancient strong-stress meter has never completely disappeared. Here are the opening lines from "The Vision of Piers Plowman," dated

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[4]"Lo, we the Spear-Danes, / in days of yore, / the great kings' / renown have heard of:/ how those princes / valor displayed. / Often Scyld Scef's son / from bands of robbers, / from many tribes, / their mead-benches dragged away, / filled earls with fear."

around 1362:

> In a sómer séson, || whan sóft was the sónne,
> I shópe me in shroúdes, || as I a shépe were,
> In hábits like an héremite, || unhóly of wórkes,
> Went wýde in this wórld, || wóndres to hére.

Now Death, a character in the play Everyman, speaks to God about a century later:

> Lord, I wýll in the wórld || go rénne over áll,
> And cruélly out-sérche || bothe gréte and smáll.
> Every mán wyll I besét || that lýveth béestly
> Out of Goddes láwes, || and drédeth not fóly.

Coleridge wrote a preface to his "Christabel" (1797), explaining that he was inventing something new, but we may not completely agree; here are lines 129-134:

> The lady sank, belike through pain,
> And Christabel with might and main
> Lifted her up, a weary weight,
> Over the threshold of the gate.
> Then the lady rose again,
> And moved, as she were not in pain.[5]

---

[5]"I have only to add that the metre of Christabel is not, properly speaking, irregular, though it may seem so from its being founded on a new principle: namely, that of counting in each line the accents, not the syllables. Though the latter may vary from seven to twelve, yet in each line the accents will be found to be only four."

Ezra Pound, of course, did know about Old English. Some of you have heard him reading from his Canto I on the Caedmon record:

> We set up mast and sail || on that swart ship,
> Bore sheep aboard her, || and our bodies also
> Heavy with weeping, || and the winds from sternward. . . .

Richard Wilbur's poem "Junk," which has a headnote from the Old English poem "Waldere," begins,

> An axe angles from my neighbor's ashcan;
> It is hell's handiwork, the wood not hickory,
> The flow of the grain not faithfully followed.

However, new options became available after the Norman Conquest of 1066. The standard meter of any language has become standard because of the dominant traits in that language, and since stress was not nearly as prominent in French as in German, the French had been counting syllables instead of stresses. Thus the alexandrine--given that name simply because it was the line usually chosen for tales about Alexander the Great--was a line having twelve syllables.

Poets writing in Middle English, then, had two well-developed (and fundamentally conflicting) metrical traditions to draw on, Germanic accentualism and French syllabism. We are Monday morning quarterbacks with 20/20 hindsight, so we view a little impatiently the centuries it took them to work out the obvious combination. Chaucer was feeling his way into the iambic pentameter in the late thirteenth century, as we can see from the prologue to his

Canterbury Tales:

Whán thát Áprílle wýth hís shóurés sóotě
Thě dróghte|ŏf Mérch|hăth pér|cěd tó|thě róote,(ω)
Ánd báth|ěd évěry véyne|ín swích|lícóur
Ŏf whích|vértú|éngén|drěd ís|thě flóur;

. . .

Thánne lóng|ěn fólk|tó góon|ŏn píl|grímáges. . . .(ω)

Unfortunately, the language was in such flux that Chaucer's great discovery got pretty well lost, and had to be discovered all over again a century and a half later. Sometimes in these later poems we can almost literally watch the poets considering their options, putting the old back to back with the new. Here are two lines from Spenser's Shepheardes Calendar (1579), written when Bill Shakespeare was too young even to start dallying with Ann Hathaway:

For had his wesand bene a little widder
He wolde have devoured both hidder and shidder.[6]

When you think about it, the iambic pentameter is almost inevitably the mathematical compromise between accentualism and syllabism. In the first place, it takes more breath to stress a syllable heavily than lightly. In the second place, if the breath unit could accommodate

---

6 Fŏr hád | hís wé|sánd béne | ă lít|tlĕ wídděr(ω)
He wólde have devóured || both hídder and shídder.

four heavy accents in Old English and twelve syllables in French, then perhaps Middle English, which was less stressed than Old English but more stressed than French, could accommodate one more stress than in Old English but two syllables fewer than in French. Then if you intersperse the syllables and stresses that result, you get a line of perfect iambic pentameter.

Here is another possibility. Perhaps the fifth stress just fills in for the heavy middle pause in Old English, much as notes of music might be substituted for musical rests to fill out a measure. And here is yet another possibility: since most iambic pentameters possess one notably lighter stress, perhaps the four-beat crash-bang, crash-bang of Old English can still be perceived beneath the surface of the modern iambic pentameter. That is what C. S. Lewis means when he calls a certain line from Paradise Lost "pure Beowulf." The line is iambic pentameter, but it is also Old English:

While ŏther ănimals | ŭnáctive rănge

While ŏther ănimals || unáctive rănge

(IV, 621).

These are a few of the theoretical issues prosodists love to argue.

By the 1590's, then, English poets were exploring three kinds of meter--accentualism, syllabism, and the new accentual-syllabism. But the Renaissance had finally reached England, and with all the new interest in Greece and Rome it was inevitable that English poets would also try to naturalize quantitative meters. Poets like Spenser

started it, and others have returned to the job many times since; W. J. Stone and Robert Bridges, for example, were championing quantitative meters at the turn of the twentieth century.

And so through historical accidents and inherent potential, English has become a remarkably rich language for poets. In English there are opportunities to try all of the world's metrical possibilities--except syllable pitch, since pitch is so unpredictable in English. Nonetheless, quantity by itself does not seem to succeed very well in our language. Neither does pure syllabism, despite many recent efforts by such distinguished poets as Bridges, W. H. Auden, Marianne Moore, Yvor Winters, Thom Gunn, Donald Hall, and James Tate. I do recommend for your classroom use Sylvia Plath's "Metaphor," a poem about pregnancy that has nine lines with nine syllables in each line; I should also remind you of one of our best poems in syllabic meter, Dylan Thomas's "Fern Hill." Still, the most successful meters in English have turned out to be accentual-syllabic and accentual.

English also offers some metrical curiosities I ought to mention, such as Gerard Manley Hopkins's "sprung rhythm," or dipodic rhythms. Di means "two" and pody comes from ped or "foot," so dipodic meters appear to combine two feet into a larger unit by using three levels of significant stress instead of the usual two; the effect is a marked lilt or swing. With some examples, you will recognize what I mean:

Once upon a|midnight|dreary,||while I|pondered,|weak and|weary
Four and twenty blackbirds, baked within a pie
Ring around the rosie, pockets full of posies
London bridge is falling down, falling down, falling down
I would I were|in Shoreham at|the setting of|the sun.

Kipling's "Philadelphia" is a fine example. If we count all the stresses (primary and secondary) we have 6, 5, 7, 5--hardly a pattern at all. But if we just count the dipodic or primary stresses, then we get the 3, 3, 4, 3 pattern of the old accentual Poulter's Measure:

If you're off|to Philadelphia in the morning,
You mustn't take|my stories for|a guide.
There's little left,|indeed,|of the city you will read of,
And all the folk|I write about|have died.

Frankly, we do not fully understand dipodic rhythms. They may be more important than we realize. Almost four decades ago, J. C. Pope argued that Old English should actually be measured in 4/8 time as a falling rhythm of dipodies, and his theory is widely celebrated.

Three levels of significant stress also turn out to be necessary in explaining the retarded (rather than galloping) anapests of such a poem as Blake's "Ah, Sunflower":

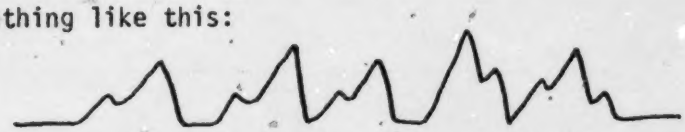
Ah Sun-|flower! weary|of time, (cf. Ah Sun-|flower! weary|of time)
Who countest the steps|of the Sun,
Seeking after that sweet|golden clime
Where the traveller's journey|is done. . . .

But if you want to beat out your brains on a couple of notorious examples

of "ambiguous meter," then take a close look at Thomas Nashe's "Adieu, Farewell Earth's Bliss" and Walter de la Mare's "The Listeners."[7]

Meter and prosody are abstractions; the link between them and a particular poem is scansion. In Paul Fussell's apt definition, scansion is "any system of representing by visual symbols more or less conventional poetic rhythms for purposes of metrical analysis and criticism." Scansion gives us an X-ray of the metrical skeleton, or a blueprint of the poem's architecture; scansion simplifies the basic metrical pattern and highlights the major exceptions or departures from that pattern; scansion translates poetic rhythm from a temporal to a spatial dimension, enabling the eye to support and correct the ear.

Three main systems of scansion are in use: the acoustic, the musical, and the graphic. Acoustic scansion involves the use of a machine like the kymograph to produce a kind of voice graph, something like this:

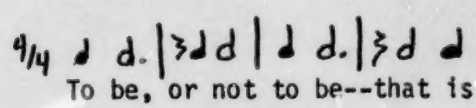


To be, or not to be--that is the question.

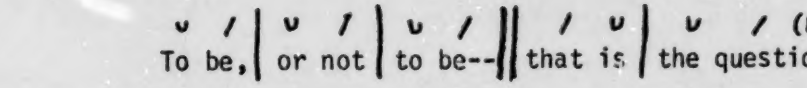
Musical scansion, which recognizes the tendency of our poetry to fall into isochronous units, as though a metronome were governing the feet or measures, adapts notation from music, something like this:

---

[7]See appendix B.



The most common method is graphic scansion, which might treat Hamlet's line like this:



Like Republicans or Baptists, prosodists seem to enjoy squabbling. The "stressers" and "timers" will stoutly defend their own method and denounce each other's, or with equal ardor they will quarrel with colleagues in their own camp. Whenever you find two teachers who use graphic scansion, you can probably start Armageddon by asking whether they both use the spondee. I don't know how serious he was, but Pope swore that John Donne deserved hanging for not keeping of meter! Well, each of the three methods of scansion has its own strengths and weaknesses, but you cannot get very far in the study of poetic rhythm without having to learn about these ways of transcribing it.

Meter surely began as a mnemonic device, a memory aid to help preliterate man remember everything from epics and genealogies to legal codes and religious formulae. This conjecture also applies to other traditional structural elements, such as rhyme patterns and stanza breaks. As a memory aid, meter and rhyme and stanza must be perfectly regular, of course. Only after writing has proven itself a reliable substitute for human memory can people dare to begin loosening the ancient, proven, rigid forms. This is how the fixed medial caesura of Old English has gradually evolved into the flexible, even nonexistent, pauses of modern English lines. This principle of

expressive variation from a norm, you see, is a fairly recent development in the history of poetry. Perfectly regular meters must have given our ancestors a sense of reassurance and confidence, but they give us the hives. As Robert Frost puts it, "we enjoy the straight crookedness of a good walking stick."

There are important implications here for "free verse." As time brings about a gradual loosening of formerly rigid forms and people gain greater confidence in the alphabet as a substitute for memory, the eventual result is bound to be something like "free verse." We might even see an evolutionary imperative at work. This is the historical significance of such a poem as Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach"; more than half the poem's thirty-seven lines are pentameter, but the rest vary from dimeter to tetrameter. That is something the Beowulf poet would never have understood.

Beginning in the nineteenth century, two social and technological upheavals occurred which drastically accelerated the pace of this evolution. One was the unprecedented, astounding decision by Western countries to achieve mass literacy. The other was the equally remarkable success with which Western countries managed to make reading matter suddenly available for this vast new reading audience. When World War I and its aftermath came along to shake the foundations of all things traditional, including meter and rhyme and stanza, then the revolution was complete. Free verse and its kindred non-metrical forms can dispense with the old memory aids, you see, because you no longer have to remember the poem--all you have to remember is where a good library is!

Actually, it remains to be seen whether we can shrug off meter so easily. It may have begun as a memory aid, but along the way we have found other virtues in it. According to Paul Fussell, meter can contribute to "meaning" in a number of important ways. First, as mere artifice, it appeals to man's love of form and raises poetry above the mundane; second, metrical substitutions, or departures from the metrical pattern, can emphasize important passages; and third, by association or convention, one poem can be linked to other poems. For example, the limerick form might be perfectly appropriate for a wedding poem, while an elegiac form such as the "In Memoriam" stanza might not be fitting--unless, ironically, you expect the marriage to break up quickly.

I might mention a fourth way in which meter can contribute to meaning, although I don't have a good name for it. If one of my students came to me because his kitty cat got turned into a pancake by a dump truck and he wanted to pour his grief into an elegy, my advice would be "Don't!" I'd urge him to wait a while, to let time provide its three-dimensional perspective, because otherwise his poem would probably be a formless blob of sentimentality. If he insisted that he had to write an elegy immediately, then I'd fall back on my second suggestion. I'd urge him to select a fixed form, something like the Italian sonnet, because the objective demands of the form would help impose structure on his emotionalism. Having to meet the external requirements of the sonnet form would help lift him out of his own internal chaos.

There is no guessing how many times poets have resorted to this simple gimmick, but I can cite two instances for you. One is Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night," a passionate eruption which is disciplined by its tight form, the villanelle. My other example is from the free-verse maestro John Berryman. "He Resigns" is a poem of three quatrains rhyming abab, composed in iambic and anapestic trimeter, so that the syllable count varies from five to nine. Apparently, with his life out of control, Berryman found traditional controls once again necessary for his poetry:

> Age, and the deaths, and the ghosts.
> Her having gone away
> in spirit from me. Hosts
> of regrets come & find me empty.
>
> I don't feel this will change.
> I don't want any thing
> or person, familiar or strange.
> I don't think I will sing
>
> any more just now;
> or ever. I must start
> to sit with a blind brow
> above an empty heart.[8]

As John Frederick Nims has said, this poem turned out to be a kind of suicide note. But what makes it so powerful, what will keep it alive long after its creator's death, is its form. Your students, or mine, could read Berryman's poem and find themselves deeply moved by it, but they wouldn't know <u>why</u>.

And that is why we must teach them things like meter.

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8 Áge, | ŭand thĕ déaths, | ŭand thĕ ghósts. 1
Hĕr hávˇing góne | ŭáwáy 2 (or "Hér hăvˇing góne | ŭáwáy")
ˇin spír|ˇit from | mĕ. Hósts 3
ŭof regréts | cŏme & fínd | mĕ émpty.(ŭ) 4

Ĭ dón't | feĕl thís | wĭll chánge. 5
Ĭ dón't | wănt án|ˇy thíng 6
ŭor pér|sŏn, fămíl|ˇar ŭor stránge. 7
Ĭ dón't | thˇínk Ĭ | wĭll síng 8

án|ˇy móre | jŭst nów; 9
ŭor év|ĕr. Ĭ | mŭst stárt 10
tŏ sít | wˇíth ă blínd brów 11
ŭabóve | ŭan émp|tˇy héart. 12

Line 1: "|Áge|" The isolated stress over "age" is an instance of what we sometimes call a headless iamb, defective iamb, truncated iamb, or simply a monosyllabic foot. The first three terms make more sense

where a clear syllable-count pattern exists in the poem but not in the particular line (e.g., "Then kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill"); in line 1 of Berryman's poem, "monosyllabic foot" might be most appropriate. Certainly the rhythmic units do seem to break as I have marked them, rather than, e.g., "Áge, ŭand |thĕ déaths|. . . ."

Line 3: "|mĕ. Hósts|" This scansion seems the simplest among several alternatives, but it clearly does point up the heavy tension (see line 10, also) between the rhetorical pattern, which urges the reader to pause after "me," and the metrical pattern, which urges him to proceed.

Line 4: "|émp ty(ω)|" Such an ending, with one or more falling (or relatively unstressed) syllables at the end of a line of rising iambs or anapests, is traditionally called "weak" or "feminine." Guidelines on non-sexist language may, of course, compel us to revise such venerable habits! The parentheses indicate that the syllable is extra or hypermetrical, added to or outside of the basic meter of the poem. It is easier to establish the hypermetrical nature of such syllables where the meter of the poem clearly has a fixed syllable count (e.g., "To be, or not to be, that is the question(ʊ)") than where the number of syllables per line varies widely.

Line 11: "|with ă blínd brów|" Classical prosody had a quantitative foot called the "ionic"|ʊʊ--|, and some modern prosodists apply that name to the accentual-syllabic arrangement|ʊʊ//|. Other modern

prosodists scan such phenomena as a pyrrhus-spondee combination |∪∪|//|. Those of us who admit no more than one strong stress in an accentual-syllabic foot-unit generally prefer the simple term "double foot," since this particular arrangement occurs frequently in iambic patterns and seems to constitute an interwoven variation on two iambs (∪/∪/ = ∪∪//) rather than being an entirely different kind of foot.

Appendix A

"The Mediterranean"

Allen Tate
(1899-1979)

Quem das finem, rex magne, dolorum?

Where we went in the boat was a long bay
A slingshot wide, walled in by towering stone—
Peaked margin of antiquity's delay,
And we went there out of time's monotone:

Where we went in the black hull no light moved
But a gull white-winged along the feckless wave,
The breeze, unseen but fierce as a body loved,
That boat drove onward like a willing slave:

Where we went in the small ship the seaweed
Parted and gave to us the murmuring shore
And we made feast and in our secret need
Devoured the very plates Aeneas bore:

Where derelict you see through the low twilight
The green coast that you, thunder-tossed, would win,
Drop sail, and hastening to drink all night
Eat dish and bowl to take that sweet land in!

Where we feasted and caroused on the sandless
Pebbles, affecting our day of piracy,
What prophecy of eaten plates could landless
Wanderers fulfil by the ancient sea?

We for that time might taste the famous age
Eternal here yet hidden from our eyes
When lust of power undid its stuffless rage;
They, in a wineskin, bore earth's paradise.

Let us lie down once more by the breathing side
Of Ocean, where our live forefathers sleep
As if the Known Sea still were a month wide—
Atlantis howls but is no longer steep!

What country shall we conquer, what fair land
Unman our conquest and locate our blood?
We've cracked the hemispheres with careless hand!
Now, from the Gates of Hercules we flood

Westward, westward till the barbarous brine
Whelms us to the tired land where tasseling corn,

Fat beans, grapes sweeter than muscadine
Rot on the vine: in that land were we born.

Appendix B

"Adieu, Farewell Earth's Bliss"

Adieu, farewell earth's bliss!
This world uncertain is:
Fond are life's lustful joys;
Death proves them all but toys.
None from his darts can fly;
I am sick, I must die.
  Lord, have mercy on us.

Rich men, trust not in wealth:
Gold cannot buy you health;
Physic himself must fade.
All things to end are made;
The plague full swift goes by:
I am sick, I must die.
  Lord, have mercy on us.

Beauty is but a flower
Which wrinkles will devour;
Brightness falls from the air;
Queens have died young and fair;
Dust hath closed Helen's eye.
I am sick, I must die.
  Lord, have mercy on us.

Strength stoops unto the grave;
Worms feed on Hector brave.
Swords may not fight with fate;
Earth still holds ope her gate.
Come, come, the bells do cry.
I am sick, I must die.
  Lord, have mercy on us.

Wit with his wantonness
Tasteth death's bitterness;
Hell's executioner
Hath no ears for to hear
What vain art can reply.
I am sick, I must die.
  Lord, have mercy on us.

Haste therefore, each degree,
To welcome destiny:
Heaven is our heritage;
Earth but a player's stage.
Mount we unto the sky!
I am sick, I must die.
  Lord, have mercy on us.

Thomas Nashe (1567–1601)

"The Listeners"

'Is there anybody there?' said the Traveller,
  Knocking on the moonlit door;
And his horse in the silence champed the grasses
  Of the forest's ferny floor:
And a bird flew up out of the turret,
  Above the Traveller's head:
And he smote upon the door again a second time;
  'Is there anybody there?' he said.
But no one descended to the Traveller;
  No head from the leaf-fringed sill
Leaned over and looked into his grey eyes,
  Where he stood perplexed and still.
But only a host of phantom listeners
  That dwelt in the lone house then
Stood listening in the quiet of the moonlight
  To that voice from the world of men:
Stood thronging the faint moonbeams on the dark stair,
  That goes down to the empty hall,
Hearkening in an air stirred and shaken
  By the lonely Traveller's call.
And he felt in his heart their strangeness,
  Their stillness answering his cry,
While his horse moved, cropping the dark turf,
  'Neath the starred and leafy sky;
For he suddenly smote on the door, even
  Louder, and lifted his head:—
'Tell them I came, and no one answered,
  That I kept my word,' he said.
Never the least stir made the listeners,
  Though every word he spake
Fell echoing through the shadowiness of the still house
  From the one man left awake:
Ay, they heard his foot upon the stirrup,
  And the sound of iron on stone,
And how the silence surged softly backward,
  When the plunging hoofs were gone.

Walter de la Mare (1873–1956)

Suggestions for Reading

The literature on prosody is dishearteningly vast, but I would recommend these few articles and books as a start:

Paul Fussell, Poetic Meter and Poetic Form (New York, revised edition 1979). Essential! Although I personally quarrel with most of Fussell's scansion examples, his book is the finest thing of its kind we have.

W. K. Wimsatt, Jr., and Monroe C. Beardsley, "The Concept of Meter: An Exercise in Abstraction," PMLA, 74 (1959), 585-598. A vigorous defense of traditional foot-prosody, pugnacious and persuasive.

Josef Malof, "The Native Rhythm of English Meters," UTSLL, 5 (1964), 580-595. A staunch argument that OE strong-stress meter has always been and still remains the foundation of English poetry.

Victor M. Hamm, "Meter and Meaning," PMLA, 69 (1954), 695-710. Unlike Malof, Hamm insists that foreign syllabism came to replace native accentualism. Lucid and stimulating.

John Hollander, "The Music of Poetry," JAAC, 15 (1956), 232-244. A learned study by someone sympathetic to musical prosody.

Northrop Frye is also attracted to musical scansion, in The Anatomy of Criticism and elsewhere; see esp. his "Lexis and Melos," in Sound and Poetry, English Institute Essays 1956, ed. Frye (New York, 1957).

There are many fine old books on the subject, from George Saintsbury's A History of English Prosody (New York, 1906-10, 3 vols.) and George R. Stewart's The Technique of English Verse (New York, 1930) to Paull Baum's The Principles of English Versification (Cambridge, Mass., 1929); a good more recent handbook is Karl Shapiro and Robert Beum's A Prosody Handbook (New York, 1965).

The introductory material in Paull Baum's Chaucer's Verse (Durnam, North Carolina) and likewise the introductory material in Harvey Gross's Sound and Form in Modern Poetry (Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1964) provide a sound traditional grounding for the beginner.

Gross also edited a book, The Structure of Verse: Modern Essays on Prosody (New York, 1966), which is excellent but out of print. It is well worth hunting for.